

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States

COMMANDERY OF THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA

MEMORIAL MEETING

FEBRUARY 13, 1918

1918

Commandery of the State of Pennsylvania

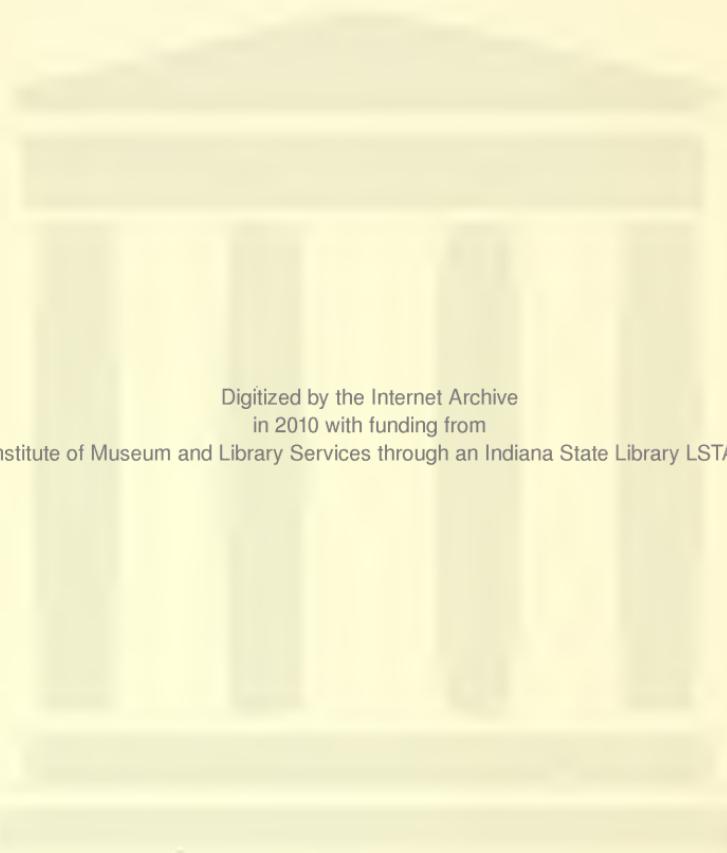
FEBRUARY 13, 1918

A B R A H A M L I N C O L N PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES MARCH 4, 1861, TO APRIL 15, 1865

Born February 12, 1809, in Hardin (La Rue) Co., Kentucky
Assassinated April 14, 1865; died April 15, 1865, at Washington, D. C.
Enrolled by Special Resolution April 16, 1865

"The Exponent of Democracy"

COMPANION WALTER GEORGE SMITH



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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

“The Exponent of Democracy”

BY COMPANION WALTER GEORGE SMITH

COMMANDER AND COMPANIONS:

Fifty-three years have elapsed since the assassin's bullet ended the mortal life of Abraham Lincoln, yet as distance from the stirring epoch in which he lived grows greater and the mists of passion clear away, his grandeur looms more distinct and his singular excellences of character and conduct become more luminous. His memory is not only the precious possession of his countrymen but, like Washington's, it belongs to all mankind. Truly was it said as he breathed his last by that imperious man who had passed with him through the storm of civil war and had felt not infrequently the firm but gentle domination that brooked no resistance when any principle of justice was involved, “Now he belongs to the ages.” Wherever the printed page is read, in any language, his simple trenchant utterances find an echo in the minds of sound political thinkers, while poetry and legend have lifted his name to those high peaks where but few have been enthroned by the common admiration of mankind. In the forests of Paraguay, Indians wear medals bearing his image, while an English statesman appeals to his utterances as the final gospel of democratic freedom.

To the few surviving veterans of this historic Legion, men who at his call went forth to four long years of bivouac, battle and siege, every phase of his life and character has been brought home by the eloquence of orators, the writings of students, the reflections of philosophers, the ardent love of all real believers in the truths upon which the fabric of our government was woven by the fathers of its Constitution. I cannot essay to add so much as a single stone to the pyramid of glory of which he himself laid the foundations in his earnest life. It would be well nigh presumptuous to attempt eulogy with the knowledge of what has been said by the great and the humble of this man, but as we are assembled in accordance with annual custom to gather inspiration from a consideration of some aspects of his career, I thought it well to ask your attention to that which stands out from all others. He was a democrat in the truest sense of a word that is not always understood and is frequently misapplied. Indeed, it is not

WALTER GEORGE SMITH

Eligibility derived as the eldest son of Deceased Companion Brevet Major-General Thomas Kilby Smith.

Lieut.-Colonel 54th Ohio Infantry September 9, 1861. Colonel October 31, 1861; discharged for promotion August 25, 1863.

Brig.-General U. S. Volunteers August 11, 1863; honorably mustered out January 15, 1866.

Brevetted Major-General U. S. Volunteers March 13, 1865, “for gallant and meritorious services during the war.”

too much to say that outside of the peoples who speak the English tongue and have been nourished upon the principles of democracy as they have been slowly evolved during a thousand years of the world's history on that island which is the mother home of English speaking peoples, whether in this Republic, in Canada, in Australia or in New Zealand, there are few indeed who understand it. Democracy means a government based upon the consent, free and untrammelled, of all the people expressed by a majority and embodied in a political constitution which recognizes the inalienable rights of life, liberty and property of every individual within the limits prescribed by reasonable rules for the preservation of order. Such a government may be administered under the form of a monarchy as well as of a republic. It is not the form but the substance that responds to the test. A tyrannous majority may constitute a despotism even more hateful than that of a single individual. The anti-social doctrines which found expression under the name of Republicanism during the horrible years of the revolution of 1789 in France and the wild dreams of those who would set up a similar caricature of government in Russia in our own day, are accepted by the ignorant of other races and too often by those who by birth and education should know better, as democratic; but they are after all only tyranny. They deify the will of emotional and self-seeking men under the name of the commonwealth. They substitute for the moral sway of one tyrant that of the mob. Human nature in and of itself, without regard to race and tradition, is not capable of appreciating or understanding democratic government. Speak to the savage of self-control or respect for the rights of others, or for any law but that of the strongest, and you appeal to a mind incapable of grasping your thought. Nor can those who have made some advance, nay very great advance, upon the road to civilization be brought at once to realize that the stability of a community rests upon the recognition of individual rights under the law. In the sense in which the term is used among men who have inherited the English habit of thought, obviously democracy is the highest ideal towards which government can approach; and it can come only to a self-controlled people educated to an appreciation of its obligations. Those who would force democracy on a people not sufficiently intelligent to accept it, understand little of its essential requisites. To sustain it there must be a common recognition of the existence of rights equal for all men, under a system of political law springing from the common attitude towards justice. "Democracy," said Theodore Parker, "is direct self-government over all the people, for all the people, by all the people." It was perhaps an unconscious echo of this definition that caused Lincoln to use a similar phrase in his immortal Gettysburg address. His biography tells us how it arrested his attention when it first fell under his eye.

Democracy was not evolved in its highest and best sense from man made philosophies, even though they bear the name of a Plato or an Aristotle. The fatal defect in them all was the acceptance of slavery. Where slavery exists, even in its most kindly and modified form, there can be no democracy. Democracy finds its sure basis upon the Christian faith, which required supernatural revelation to bring its truth home to men, the only faith which teaches the essential equality of all human souls in the scheme of redemption. Once the Christian belief has entered into the minds of men, there follows an appreciation of the injustice of exploiting any man or any class of men, for the benefit of

others. If every human soul is so precious in the sight of God that He deemed it worthy to send his Son on earth to suffer and die that it might have the chance of salvation, then everything that puts the mark of oppression of man over man becomes a sin in the sight of their common Father.

Although Lincoln was no theologian, it would seem that from his earliest manhood this truth had become his strongest conviction. It is hard for us to realize that south of the Ohio River less than three generations ago, such sights as revolted his keen sense of justice when he saw manacled slaves for the first time, were of common occurrence; that human slavery which at first was practised in all the world was still maintained as a just and Christian institution by descendants of English men; and was abolished only at the cost of the greatest civil war of modern history. It took long years of bitter controversy to bring home to the people of the United States, intelligent and liberty-loving as they were, that in the long run there could be no lasting compromise with moral evil. The lesson now so easily learned was obscure to many self-respecting moralists until Lincoln demonstrated with his invincible reasoning that this country could not endure half slave and half free, and applied the words of our Saviour that a kingdom divided against itself must surely fall. Either the American people would go backwards into the darkness of feudal conditions, or forwards to the light. No one not a lover of his kind, no one not a democrat in the truest sense of the term, could have taken the stand which Lincoln, Chase, Seward and their compeers made their own in the days when obloquy was the only sure reward to follow.

There is a vast difference between the mental processes of men such as these and of impetuous, emotional people who, seeing an evil, cannot wait until it is plucked out, no matter what may be the consequence to the good with which it is entwined. Unlike the man of the gospel who permitted the tares and the wheat to grow together until the harvest time permitted their safe separation, they would at once root out the tares, without consideration that thereby the whole harvest would be destroyed. We cannot but respect the self-sacrificing bravery of the pioneers of reform, but the government of men is a subtle and complex problem, and often the patient endurance of temporary evil is wiser in the long run than the impetuous methods of emotional leaders, with whom egotism and self complacency take the place of prudence.

Lincoln's greatness of mind was the concomitant of a patient character tried in a school of uttermost hardship. He came up from a poverty so great that no instance of history is comparable with his triumph over it. He was self-educated, and attained a perfection in the use of language which has made his writings a model of style, while his thoughts were regulated by a logical faculty which enabled him to penetrate to the heart of every problem he was required to solve. Human nature was to him an open book. The common failings of men appealed to his keen sense of humor, their sufferings aroused his continued sympathy. Too wise not to realize his own limitations, he was ever humble minded. There is no record of any word or deed to show any feeling of self-exaltation in his whole career, not even when by the sheer force of his own will he was conquered circumstances and took his place among the rulers of the earth. At this crisis in the world's history, there is much to be gained in pondering on what he was and on what he did. Everywhere the great principle of democracy is on trial.

Boldly challenged by the military despotism which wields the united power of Prussia and her vassals, should democracy fail in the present war the harvest of centuries of struggle will be lost. The war of the rebellion tested the power of democracy to overcome the cancerous growth of slavery, but the work of Lincoln and his associates was to save the Union. Upon its maintenance depended the success of the experiment of democratic self-government upon a larger scale than had ever been attempted before. The work succeeded largely because of his steadfast belief that it was a work not of aggrandizement for individual or nation, but because it was a work essentially of justice.

We have waxed rich and prosperous as a people because of the tenacity which Lincoln showed and the support that was given him by the soldiers in the field and the masses at home. We are now in danger because we have forgotten the lessons of experience. We shall be saved by recurring to the principles for which Lincoln stood. It is not by material wealth nor by shirking sufferings that nations survive. The whole civilized world watched but did nothing while the forces of tyranny and reaction girded themselves for a half century to conquer and rob it. Those nations which professed the democratic faith forgot that the blessings of free government do not come like light and air without struggle; that all gifts and blessings are accompanied by corresponding responsibility. We Americans have allowed ourselves to trifle with the ideals of our ancestors. Immersed in the pursuit of the means, we have forgotten the end. Stealthily and surely, selfish schemers have laid their yoke upon ignorant voters, while the natural leaders of the community have held aloof from public affairs. Great municipalities have fallen under the control of men whose first thought has been for themselves. The sudden shock of war has shown the weak spots in our polity. Three years have passed since the atrocious attempt to enslave the modern world began in the Austrian attack on Servia and the German on Belgium. We were slow to realize that our duty and our salvation as a nation combined to require us to use our every resource to resist these assaults on every principle of justice and international law. We saw our citizens slaughtered, our flag insulted, our dignity outraged, and had to make a choice between the loss of honor and the acceptance of war. Even in the midst of the hardships which have resulted from accepting the issue, we can rejoice that at last we have set our feet upon the right path and have not lost by cowardice the rich heritage that has come to us from the wisdom and bravery of other generations. Can we doubt what would have been the attitude of Lincoln had he lived in this generation? We are told by Herndon that as late as 1856 after the Bloomington Convention in Illinois had adopted a declaration against the pro-slavery Nebraskan legislation, when Lincoln had made a speech so great that the emotions of the reporters overcame them and they dropped their pens to follow his words, his fellow citizens of Springfield were so cold there was but one besides Herndon and Lincoln himself who had the courage to attend a ratification meeting. To those two men he spoke these words: "While all seems dead, the age itself is not. It liveth as sure as our Maker liveth. Under all this seeming want of life and motion, the world does move, nevertheless. Be hopeful. And now let us adjourn, and appeal to the people." Therein spoke the great exponent of American democracy. Undiscouraged by the apathy and timidity of his friends and neighbors, he was content to wait until the full force of the truth which that

little group represented should come home to the apprehension of the people, and then his faith in their ultimate sense of justice left him confident of their decision.

It may be that the growth of population, the undigested mass of foreign immigrants, the unhappy prejudices handed down by tradition against one of the allied nations, make it even more difficult for the truth of the present issue to reach to the masses of our people; but human nature has not changed since Lincoln's day, and we see from hour to hour the irresistible power of public opinion crystallizing against the arch enemy of democracy and Christian civilization. As of old the prophet spoke so we may now say, "Woe to thee that spoilest, shall not thou also be spoiled? And dealest scornfully, shall not they also deal scornfully with thee? When thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled; when thou shalt be weary, and make an end to deal scornfully, they shall deal scornfully with thee." Isaiah 33-1.

When Lincoln delivered his great speech accepting his nomination to the Senate, on the 17th of June, 1858, it was in the face of the protest of most of his political friends. He read it to them before delivery and in reply to their comment he answered: "Friends, this thing has been retarded long enough. The time has come when all these sentiments should be uttered; and if it is decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked to the truth—let me die in the advocacy of what is just and right." Often as it has been quoted, let us listen again to this passage: "'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it to cease to be divided—it will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward until it becomes alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South."

Under the providence of God the nations of the earth in our day are closely joined by common interests. The subjection of the forces of steam and electricity have brought them together in some degree, even closer than were the States of the Union when Lincoln uttered his prophetic words. It is not now chattel slavery which divides opinion into two hostile camps but, as it has been phrased, autocracy on the one hand and democracy on the other. Through centuries of alternate victory and defeat, the democratic philosophy of government has slowly asserted itself. Misunderstood, misapplied, abused and distorted as it has been by shallow philosophers and fanatical sciolists, it stands the hope of mankind. As Lincoln said: "It is the eternal struggle between these two principles, right and wrong, throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops itself. It is the same spirit that says 'You work and toil and earn bread and I eat it.' No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to destroy the people of his own nation to live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle."

The life of Lincoln will be always associated in the minds of the American people with that of his great and gifted rival, Douglas. From their young manhood these two men were in constant association and their talents placed them each at the head of a great party. We can see clearly now what Douglas did not see, that the issue of slavery was a moral issue and could not be compromised. The unerring instinct of Lincoln saw what Douglas could not see, with all his gifts. In paying tribute to the breadth and democratic spirit of Lincoln, let us not forget the lesson to be drawn from the glorious sunset of Douglas's disappointing life. When he had witnessed the inauguration of his great rival, he realized that the storm of civil war was really about to burst. He hastened back to Illinois and there addressed the legislature on the 25th of April, 1861, in language which went to the heart of his followers and sent thousands and thousands of recruits to the Union armies. Hear his words: "When hostile armies are marching under a new and odious banners against the government of our country, the shortest way to peace is the most stupendous and unanimous preparation for war." Two months afterwards at the age of 48 his life was ended, but for four years more through storm and strife, the friend and rival whose triumph he had witnessed and to whose support he gave his dying efforts, steered the Ship of State until it finally reached the harbor of safety. The same spirit of devoted and unselfish patriotism will be the salvation of our republic in these modern days, however great may be the trials through which it must pass. The sacred traditions obscured perhaps for a time, present themselves with renewed force in our own troubled days.

The singular breadth of Lincoln's democracy is of course exemplified in his attitude towards the central controlling question of his time, slavery and the preservation of the Union. On the one hand he had to deal with the extreme pro-slavery men who defended the institution, not alone on grounds of expediency and justice, but on that of religion; on the other hand, the extreme abolitionists who would willingly have seen the disruption of the Union rather than compromise with the abhorred evil. In his fine tribute at the Centennial celebration in New York, Lyman Abbott shows the appreciation of the undercurrents of human nature which distinguished Lincoln in dealing with these extreme views. No one should have doubted his moral antipathy to the system, and his poignant sympathy with its black victims. In speaking of the position of the negro in the senatorial contest, he said:

"All the powers of the earth seem rapidly combining against him. Mammon is after him, ambition follows, philosophy follows, and the theology of the day is fast joining the cry. They have him in his prison house. They have searched his person and left no prying instrument with him. One after another they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him and now they have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key—the key in the hands of a hundred different men and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places; and they stand musing as to what invention in all the dominions of mind and matter can be produced to make the impossibility of his escape more complete than it is."

Yet, Lincoln harbored no bitterness towards the slaveholders. He thought, "They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist among them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us,

we should not instantly give it up." So he contented himself with his first and certain cure,—a cure which would have worked itself out, we cannot doubt, had not the sword of civil war cut the disease from our political system by its quick and cruel surgery. "No further extension of slavery on American soil," was the one principle on which he was inflexible.

Even in the midst of a world war, in the contemplation of which our civil war, prodigious as it was in its theatre of action and its consequences, becomes dwarfed, we can but look forward to the grave problems that are to follow its cessation. That the democratic peoples of the earth will never submit to any but an effective and just peace, is not possible. But when German aggression is overcome and the military caste is humbled, the world will be a vastly different world than that we knew before the fatal days of 1914. None can grasp the possibilities of what may follow the changed attitude of society towards social and economic questions. Reverence for our most sacred constitutional ideals has already given place in many minds to a sympathy open or latent for socialistic theories of the State's function, and these theories are themselves the product of German philosophy and the reaction against German practice. The inevitable consequence of the disintegrating effects of class selfishness is State management of the great industries on which the physical well being of society depends. Men value liberty, but in the long run they will sacrifice liberty if they think thereby to gain security. There will be necessary for the reconstruction of industrial peace, vital adjustments between the forces of capital and labor which should be allied and which are antagonistic. Here again the beneficent thoughts of Lincoln make his democratic ideals show the path of endeavor. I borrow from Dr. Abbott two quotations which are typical. In a letter to the Workingmen's Association of New York, he wrote:

"Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital and deserves much the higher consideration. Capital has its rights which are worthy of protection as any other rights, nor is it denied that there is and probably always will be a relation between capital and labor producing mutual benefits. The error is in assuming that the whole labor of the community exists within that relation....There is not of necessity any such thing as the free, hired laborer being fixed to that condition for life. Many independent, everywhere in these States, a few years back in their lives were hired laborers. The prudent penniless beginner in the world labors for wages a while....and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This is the just and generous and prosperous system which opens the way to all—gives hope to all, and consequent energy and progress and improvement of condition to all."

How sincere was his advocacy of this theory will appear from his statement of his humble beginning. "I am not ashamed to confess that twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat boat—just what might happen to any poor man's son. I want other men to have a chance—and I think the black man is entitled to it, in which he can better his condition—when he may look forward in hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next work for himself and finally to hire men to work for him. This is the true system..... Thus you can better your condition, and so it may go on and on in one ceaseless round so long as man exists on the face of the earth."

The growth and development of corporate enterprises, the magnitude of the work which in our modern civilization requires the system and combination that can be attained only through corporate effort, have obscured the importance of the individual. But corporations are made up of individuals, and the individual sense of justice sooner or later brings about a system of checks and balances which are measured by the force of what the community believes to be right. There can be no real prosperity based upon an unjust system, and that which fails to protect the individual in the enjoyment of his rights under the law will sooner or later go the way of the discarded lumber of the past. There is no easy way to meet the complicated problems of modern society, which become more complicated as population and wealth increase, but the spirit in which they are approached can be educated and is not more difficult of apprehension now than when the foundations of the Republic were laid. As it was grasped and assimilated by the Western lawyer meditating over his labors, whether of the hand or the head, in those years of his preparation to be the pilot of democracy, it can be grasped and assimilated by any open-minded man today. It is not drawn from any mysterious theory, but from the compelling doctrine first taught by Him whose sinless years were "breathed beneath the Syrian blue."

The doctrine embodies principles of justice and charity so simple that a child may understand it and so profound that without it all the efforts of human wisdom must come to naught. It is written large in every great act of Lincoln's life.

